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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PHNOM PENH 000586

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STATE FOR EAP/MLS; GENEVA FOR RMA

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [PHUM](#) [CB](#)

SUBJECT: TENSIONS AMONG PRO-DEMOCRACY ADVOCATES ON THE RISE

Classified By: Pol/Econ Chief Margaret McKean; Reason: 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) Summary. Cambodian Center for Human Rights (CCHR) leader Kem Sokha and opposition party leader Sam Rainsy are undergoing a period of tension that has the potential to undermine Cambodian democratic consolidation. Kem Sokha claims that Sam Rainsy is unnecessarily worried over Kem Sokha's political aspirations and is seeking to damage CCHR's work. Rainsy's party has withdrawn from future participation in CCHR's public fora and has reportedly urged SRP followers throughout the country to end support for Kem Sokha. The bickering between potential rivals must be music to PM Hun Sen's ears. End Summary.

Kem Sokha-Sam Rainsy Falling Out

12. (SBU) On March 23, CCHR leader Kem Sokha visited the Embassy to discuss continued speculation regarding his political aspirations, as well as the Sam Rainsy Party's (SRP) decision to withdraw participation from CCHR public fora. Kem Sokha said that senior SRP official Son Chhay had contacted him regarding a letter that party leader Sam Rainsy had asked him to send to the CCHR leader. The letter contained two points; first, SRP claimed that CCHR was not behaving as a real NGO but was criticizing all the political parties, including the SRP; and second, that the public fora do not provide adequate time to SRP representatives. Kem Sokha asked that Son Chhay not send the letter, and that he (Kem Sokha) and Sam Rainsy should meet and discuss these issues before a formal letter of complaint is sent. Unfortunately, the CCHR continued, Son Chhay said that Rainsy wanted the letter to go out, which was copied to IRI and USAID. SRP members in the provinces reportedly were also receiving it, added Kem Sokha. The CCHR leader noted that in the past, this was the sort of criticism they would receive from the CPP -- but not the SRP.

13. (SBU) Kem Sokha defended his public fora and said he treated all parties fairly. The ten-minute limit for speakers is to ensure that everyone gets a chance; otherwise, people use their time to campaign on their party's behalf. He noted that even he is subject to the ten-minute rule. On the issue of establishing a political party, Kem Sokha said that he had no intention of returning to politics before 2008, but did not rule out the possibility following the 2008 elections. He suspects that Rainsy is unhappy with him because CCHR refused to participate in the Rainsy-proposed Land Authority to resolve land disputes, in which Rainsy wanted NGO representation. Kem Sokha said that the NGOs should be independent of the body and have agreed to form a working group and make recommendations. DCM advised Kem Sokha not to engage in tit-for-tat struggles with the opposition leader who has his own reasons for wanting to make

the Land Authority a success.

14. (U) The press on March 27 announced the differences between the two pro-democracy leaders and the SRP's decision to withdraw from the public fora. One paper quoted acting SRP Secretary General Meng Rita accusing Kem Sokha of hoarding funds in order to launch a political party, and of using the organization's public forums to create a personality cult. CCHR spokesperson Ou Virak considered the accusations as groundless, noting that everyone is subject to the ten minute limit at the public fora.

Comment

15. (C) Kem Sokha used the first 40 minutes of the meeting to try and convince us that he did not want to start of political party, and the second 40 minutes explaining how he was the best person to lead Cambodia in the future, criticizing Rainsy as too confrontational and controversial a figure. But it is unlikely Kem Sokha will try to form a political party before 2008. There is inadequate time to develop a party structure and the CCHR leader recognizes that he would splinter the democratic vote, rather than act as a unifying factor. But it's also clear that he and Rainsy are seeing one another as competitors and are not eager to help one another. Kem Sokha appears to be banking on Rainsy failing to deliver on the issues (land grabbing, corruption, institution-building) most germane to the pro-democracy reform agenda, which could open the door to Kem Sokha's re-entry into politics post-2008. Either way, the bickering between the two prominent former critics of the government must be music to PM Hun Sen's ears. We will continue to urge Kem Sokha and Sam Rainsy to avoid undermining one another and focus instead on supporting the democratic process. End

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Comment.

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